

V1_3rd_after_Epiphany= Those Who Hear the Word of God with Hard Hearts

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U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

VOL. I = THE BAD CHRISTIAN

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Those Who Hear the Word of God with Hard Hearts

“But only say the word, and my servant shall be healed.” Matt. 8: 8.

The centurion’s faith in Jesus Christ was great, for he looked upon him as the Almighty God, and, instead of asking him to come down to his house, as others did in similar circumstances, he simply made known to our Lord what he wanted: “Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, and is grievously tormented.” And when Jesus said, “I will come and heal him,” the centurion answered: No, Lord, it is not necessary to go to that trouble; “but only say the word and my servant shall be healed.” There is no doubt that, as the centurion said, nothing is impossible to the Word of God; yet there are Christians nowadays whose hearts are so hardened that not even the Almighty God, who has left man his liberty with regard to good and evil, can penetrate them with that two-edged sword.

There are some hearts so hard and flinty, that no matter how undesirable the truths they hear in sermons are, they cannot be moved to repent of their sins, to change their unchristian habits, and to amend their wicked lives.

St. Paul calls the Word of God a sharp sword: “Take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Ephes. 6: 17), and a sword which penetrates both soul and body. And again he says: “The Word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword; and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit, of the joints also and of the marrow” (Hebr. 4:12). There is no vice that cannot be slain and exterminated by the sword of the Word of God. If pride or vanity impels you to extol yourself above others, take that sword immediately: “Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” (Gen. 3: 19). Remember who and what you are; you are but a handful of earth, and you will have to return to earth; why should you be proud of your beauty? It is only skin deep, and will one day be the food of worms. “Every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled” (Luke 14: 11). “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (James 4: 6). If impure passions and the desires of the flesh assail the soul, take at once the sword of the Word of God: “Neither fornicators, nor adulterers, nor the effeminate shall possess the kingdom of God” (1Cor. 6: 9, 10). Impure and sensual souls, “which of you shall dwell with everlasting burnings?” (Is. 33: 14.) How will you bear the eternal fires that await your momentary pleasure? If you are tempted to avarice and the greed of temporal things, take the

sword of the Word of God at once: “What doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?” (Matt. 16: 26.) “Thou fool, this night do they require thy soul of thee; and whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12: 20.) Why do you torment yourself, and grub in the earth like a mole? Perhaps this very night your soul will be hurried into eternity. If the perverse world tries to lead you astray by its scandalous fashions and vain usages, take at once the sword of the Word of God: “Love not the world, nor the things which are in the world” (John 2: 15). “Whosoever will be a friend of the world, becometh an enemy of God” (James 4: 4). If the calamities and miseries of life assail you, disturb your heart and mind, and threaten to drive you into despair, arm yourself at once with the sword of the Word of God: Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5: 5). “The world shall rejoice, and you shall be made sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy” (John 16: 20); your sorrow will last but a short time, and will then be exchanged for eternal joy: “The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8: 18).

But all this is of no good to those hard-hearted people of whom we are speaking. The sword may strike where it wills; it cannot penetrate. They hear of the magnificent promises of an exceeding great reward for virtue, and threats of eternal punishment in hell that awaits sinners, of the uncertainty, and the speedy approach of an unforeseen and unprovided death, and of the strict judgment that will follow it. But nothing can touch their hearts; they are incapable of being softened; they go home from the sermon with the same hearts and minds that they brought to it.

The human heart, at first, while it is still innocent, is, so to speak, a soft dough, which can be easily shaped and moulded into any form by the divine inspirations, by the teaching and instruction given by parents, and by the exhortations of preachers and confessors to virtue and piety. That is the proper time, too, for parents to fulfill the important duty and obligation which God has imposed on them, and which they voluntarily have taken upon themselves, under pain of eternal damnation, of keeping their children from all dangers and occasions of sin, and, after the example of the elder Tobias, training them from their very childhood to fear God, to love him, and to serve him alone: “And from his infancy he taught him to fear God, and to abstain from all sin” (Tob. 1: 10).

If one who is still innocent learns to know evil through the carelessness or bad example of his parents, or through the influence of wicked companions, and falls into grievous sin, then, alas! The crust begins to form itself around the dough; the first tenderness of conscience, the modesty and the softness of the heart disappear. Still the heart may yet be moved without difficulty, and be brought on a better way. A single thought on the part of the uneasy, gnawing conscience, that cries out, as it generally does in one’s earlier years: Unhappy man, what have you done? Where are you going to? You have lost your soul, offended God, forfeited heaven, and lost all! A single word on the part of his confessor, to show him the deformity and the grievous malice of sin, and the severe punishment that awaits it; a single sermon that speaks to him of God and of divine truths, may be a sharp knife that cuts into his heart and moves it to sorrow and repentance. But if he afterwards gets into other temptations and occasions of sin, so that he falls frequently, then the crust gets harder and harder; the former horror and dread of mortal sin disappear gradually, until at length the sin becomes habitual, the voice of conscience is hushed, and the sinner feels quite at ease in his miserable state. The good inspirations of God and of his angel guardian find no hearing any longer, the exhortations and threats of parents, confessors and preachers cannot frighten him; the great truths of the certainty and uncertainty of death, of the strict judgments of God, of the eternal joys of heaven, of the undying fires of hell, cannot reach his heart or soften it, because he has heard them often before. Not that the knife has lost its sharpness and power, for the Word of God is always a two-edged sword; but it cannot penetrate the hard and flinty heart. Therefore, with people of that kind the Word of God falls on a rock, and through want of moisture dries up and produces no fruit.

2. There is another class of hearers of the Word of God who are not altogether hard, who hear the Word of God with eagerness and satisfaction, and who are even impressed by it, so that they are moved to do good and to avoid evil; but not every truth that is preached to them has that effect; in some things they are

so hard and flinty that nothing can touch their hearts. There are certain vices, certain abuses to which they are addicted, and which, as they have persuaded themselves, are of no great harm, they do not intend to amend. With regard to those vices and abuses the Gospel truths are powerless; before the sermon has well commenced they have already hardened their hearts and fully determined to take no notice of anything that is said against their pet failings; and when they hear anything of the kind they at once distract their minds from the sermon by thinking of something else; or else they listen to it, but laugh at it in their hearts. You may say what you like, they think, you will not persuade me in this matter; I will believe you in other things, but as far as this is concerned you may preach till tomorrow without making any impression on me, for I have fully made up my mind not to change.

Therefore, they listen with pleasure to a sermon in praise of certain practices of devotion and virtue, which they are accustomed to perform, or against certain vices they are not much given to, such as cursing, swearing, blasphemy, detraction, drunkenness, injustice, adultery and the like. Oh, excellent! They say when they hear those vices sharply spoken of; that sermon is very practical; it is a pity so and so is not here; those are really fundamental truths that the preacher is explaining. But if their own bad and vicious habits are attacked; for instance, the deplorable carelessness of many parents who train up their sons and daughters to vanity and idleness, extravagance and indecency in dress, the dangerous company and evening parties in which both sexes meet, not only to squander away in an unchristian and wicked manner, in dancing, gambling and folly, the precious time that was given them for the sole purpose of saving their souls, but who, too, sacrifice their hearts to the perverse world, the corrupt flesh, and, as a matter of course, to the devil, too; if the preacher ventures to say that all outward works of piety, such as prayer, hearing Mass, visiting the churches, confession and Communion are of no good as long as one disobeys the precepts of God or of the Church, even in one particular, or as long as one is not ready always to follow the divine will when it is made known to him, and so on; oh, then it is a different matter altogether! The preacher might have held his tongue about that, they think; he is only making decent people ashamed, and disturbing consciences unnecessarily, and filling them with scruples; he is too coarse and blunt; he does not know how respectable people must live in the world; he cannot draw the line between them and the common herd.

The only fruit they reap from the Word of God is anger, displeasure and bitterness against the preacher, a still greater hardness of heart, and a firmer determination not to amend their lives in spite of what they have heard. They resemble the high-priests, the Scribes and Pharisees, who, although Jesus Christ, the Teacher of all teachers, preached to them himself in the most forcible manner, condemning their pride, deceitfulness and hypocrisy, yet derived no fruit from what they heard, except to become still more embittered against Jesus Christ, who was so anxious for their spiritual welfare; so that they more than once took up stones to throw at him, until at length they became so hardened and obdurate in wickedness that they condemned the innocent Son of God to be nailed to the shameful Cross as a public malefactor. The only comfort to me and to other preachers under those circumstances is this very example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who, as the eternal Wisdom, foresaw with unerring certainty that his preaching would only make the Scribes and Pharisees more embittered and obdurate, nevertheless continued to preach to them, and to condemn severely their sins and vices.

Many of these people are not satisfied with being themselves so hard-hearted in certain things that they do not profit by sermons; they cannot even bear to see others profiting by such sermons, and therefore they try to have as many companions as possible in their unlawful customs and abuses that they may indulge therein with all the more freedom. To this end they spare neither adverse comment nor ridicule against the preacher, when they are in company, so as to lessen his authority; they agree among themselves to adhere to their customs with all the greater pertinacity; they laugh at those who, having seen the truth, renounce and amend those abuses; they always speak of them as simple, unsophisticated people, who do not know how to live like the rest of the world.

But does it then follow that those people must absent themselves from sermons altogether, and think: oh, what is the use of my going to a sermon? It will not do me the least good! Not by any means. On the contrary, they should hear sermons constantly, because it may be that the reason of their obduracy with regard to certain vices is the fact that they seldom, and with frequent interruptions, and only when their humor takes them, hear the Word of God. There is not much good in people of that kind hearing the Word of God now and then; one or two sermons will not make any impression on them; nothing but emphatic and oft-repeated exhortation and instruction will enable them to overcome their bad habits. But no matter how hard a heart is, it must at last be softened and brought to a knowledge of the truth by being frequently touched by the Word of God. A strong fortress cannot be taken at the first, second, or third assault; but it can be taken after a long siege, when the garrison has been starved out.

A holy man being once asked what was the best way to convert a hard-hearted sinner, replied: "Water is by nature soft, but stone hard;" yet no stone is so hard that if water constantly drops on it from a height it will not be eventually worn away and bored through; "so also the Word of God is soft and gentle, and our hearts are hard." Consequently, if a man hears the Word of God frequently and constantly, it is hardly possible that his heart will not at last be softened and penetrated, so that he will fear God and love him (Ezechi. 36: 25).

Was not the heart of Augustine as hard as a stone, and so habituated to pride and sensual indulgence that, as he himself publicly acknowledges, he had so much difficulty in the beginning of his conversion that it seemed to him an utter impossibility to abstain from vice? Yet by hearing frequently the Word of God in the sermons of St. Ambrose, that flinty heart became softened and impressed, so that it glowed with the love of God in a most remarkable manner; in consequence of which St. Augustine is often represented as holding a burning heart in his hand.

If any of you here present is a hard-hearted sinner, to him I would say, with all possible earnestness: my dear Christian, whatever you do, no matter how deep you are sunk in vice, do not on any account absent yourself from sermons! Come regularly, and, if you feel no inclination or desire to repent, at least beg of God in the beginning of the sermon to give you a desire of repentance; offer to him your obdurate heart, and beg of him to soften it according to his will, and to give you the grace to know and repent of your sins, that you may enter after your death into heaven, and be happy for ever and ever. Amen.

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